Connecting with the Social Brain: Changing Attitudes, Beliefs & Behaviors

Lead Researchers
Dr. Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS

Research Assistant
Tim Li

March 19, 2015
Special Thanks To The Following Sponsors

Public Affairs Council

Mosaic

Gagen MacDonald

ExxonMobil
Agenda

• Research Program Objectives
• Research Strategies
• Summary of Findings
• Implications for the Profession
• Future Research
• Questions/Answers
Research Objectives

• To understand the connections between emerging research in psychology, cognitive behavior, neuroscience and public relations

• To develop research and practice expertise in these emerging fields

• To establish the IPR as a centre of influence in the new field of “Behavioral Communication”
Research Strategies

- **Scan, assess and review** the literature in the fields of cognitive behavior, psychology, social neuroscience and behavioral economics.
- **Draw connections** to public relations, communications processing and effects, narrative transport/storytelling, and applied fields of crisis communications, health communication, issues management and consumer behaviour.
- **Narrow focus** to two areas: the persuasive communicator and narrative processing and resistance.
Scan, Assess & Review

• 150 articles
  – Social Neuroscience
  – Communicator-Message Theory
  – Narrative Theory
  – Cultivation Theory
  – Heuristics & Priming
  – Applied Fields (public policy, health communication, environmental issues)
Understanding PR through psychology
Communicator Qualities

courteous
unprejudiced equal
impartial generous alluring
creditable decent
solid candid original know-how
principled convincing
familiarity reasonable education
honorable legitimate intelligence
pure reliable straightforward grasp
honest good lawful dependable
clean sincere satisfying expertise
charming ability engaging insight
satisfactory rational judgment beautiful
civil true objective plausible
authoritative accurate conclusive
trustworthy equitable
proper credible awareness
conceivable
Communicator Qualities

Trust & Empathy

Oxytocin
Communicator

Understanding and Managing Stakeholder Expectations

Commitment
Dialogue Support
Authenticity

Fairness
Communicator Identification
Expertise
Endorsement
Attractiveness
Need for evaluation
Receiver Self-Monitoring

Content vs Source Focus
Self-Validation

Dialogue/Discussion
Receiver Commitment to Dialogue

Commitment to Dialogue

Self-Validation

TRUST

Persuasiveness of the communicator and the message
Attitudes/Beliefs
Behavioral Change Intentions

Behavoural Change

Real and Perceived Personal Characteristics of the Communicator

Understanding and Managing Stakeholder Expectations
Narrative Persuasion
The insula is active during the task of taking another’s perspective in narrative identification and conformity based attitude change.
The Type and Nature of Individual Cognitive Processing of Stories (Heuristic or Systematic)

**Narrative**

- **Receiver**
  - Familiarity
  - Attention
  - Need for Affect
  - Need for Cognition

- **Narrative Components**
  - Story (Characters, Homophily, Imagery, Fluency)
  - Structure
  - Discourse (craftsmanship)

- **Cultural Embeddedness**
  - Cultural content familiarity
  - Culturally Resonant Language

**Narrative Transport**

- Perspective and Experience Taking
- Self-Referencing
- Social Proliferation

**Identification**

**Narrative Persuasion**

- Attitudes/Beliefs
- Behavioral Change Intentions
- Neural Activity

**Behavioral Change**
Resistance

• Mental resistance opposes persuasion
Narrative Specific Resistance (Parasocial Interaction, plausability, etc.)

- Reactance
  - Counterarguing
  - Selective Attention/Avoidance
  - Perceived Invulnerability
  - Perceived norms and biases
  - Self-Efficacy
  - Outcome Expectancies
  - Message Minimization

- Transportation
- Self-Referencing
- Identification
Implications For The Profession

• Communicators
  – Attributes and Effect

• Narrative/Storytelling
  – More than just a story

• Understanding Resistance
  – Cognitive determinants of attitude/behavioral change
Behavioral Communicators

• Communicators
  – Direct or Indirect levels of influence
  – Understand audience expectations of communicator
  – Evaluate the cognitive impact of organizational spokespeople
  – Develop an assessment instrument to understand the effectiveness of key communicator attributes
It’s More Than A Story

• Narratives must not only be well crafted but must be culturally contextualized and resonate with the receiver.

• Storytellers must ensure that the receivers fit within the social, self-perspective and experiences of the story.

• Pre-campaign research should assess the degree of “fit” between the story and the receivers.
The Wall of Resistance

• Pre-narrative construction research must test for the level of resistance within the receivers – individual tests for all 8 factors to determine the intensity of resistance.

  – This research should also discover counter-arguments, perceived vulnerabilities, degree of self-efficacy

  – Understanding these resistance factors could help build a more effective narrative.
Future Directions
Future Directions
Future Directions
Our Next Steps

• Launch IPR Behavioral Communications
  – Blog/Website
  – Primer on Behavioral Communications
  – Bibliography
  – Landscape Papers

• Behavioral Communications Symposium
  – Spring 2015
Your Thoughts?

For More Information

Dr. Terence (Terry) Flynn, APR, FCPRS

tflynn@mcmaster.ca

@terryflynn